

# Pier Rats, Jack Smelt, and Dancing Walleyes

*CRFS Sampler Kirk Lombard meets and greets  
the pier fishermen of the city*

*by Kirk Lombard, Fisheries Technician*

*photo courtesy K. Lombard*

Over the past year, Kirk Lombard has worked as a sampler for the California Recreational Fisheries Survey, a joint project of the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC). For Kirk, this has meant spending a great deal of time in places where anglers gather along the shore: piers, docks, jetties, launch ramps, and beaches. He interviews fishermen, measuring and weighing their fish, and answers questions regarding fishing regulations, all to keep tabs on the status and health of nearshore fish populations. But, as he describes in this article, it's the stories, the interactions, and the remarkable characters he meets that keeps his job interesting.

Sunday morning, 7:15 am. The alarm clock rings but I'm already up and about—the coffee is brewing, the toaster is toasting, my rucksack is packed full of forms, and my fish measuring equipment, (scales, board, tape measure) is sitting by the door. I quickly scarf down a bagel, pound my coffee, and put on my beige shirt with the DFG and PSMFC badges sewn onto the shoulders. Donning a DFG baseball cap, I head for my white, 1991 Toyota Tercel.

My assignment for today — in official DFG jargon — is MM SFO 04. MM stands for “man made,” and SFO 04 is the fancy-sounding code name for a geographic area in San Francisco which includes Pier 7, The Ferry Platform Building, South Harbor Marina Pier, and Agua Vista Pier. I am responsible for visiting all these “man-made” areas (in this case, piers), monitoring the catch on each, and interviewing all the anglers who finish fishing while I am there.

Fifteen minutes after getting into my car, I arrive at Pier 7. Parking in this area can be tricky, but the guy at the parking lot says he'll let me in for free if I tell him

where the stripers are biting. I tell him, “Off the rocks at Coyote Point.” Since the stripers are always biting (more or less) off the rocks at Coyote Point, this isn't much in the way of an inside scoop. The parking attendant smiles and gives me a free pass.

I get out of my car and cross the street. My eyes scour the pier for anglers. As part of my CRFS duties, every time I approach or leave a pier I am expected to do a head count. I can already see the tell-tale signs of “pier rats” (this is the term by which serious pier anglers often refer to themselves): shopping carts with buckets and jerry-rigged PVC rod holders lashed in with bungee cords.

I walk down the pier to introduce myself to the anglers and tell them a little about the CRFS project. About halfway down I recognize several faces from last month. Suddenly one of the anglers flashes a big smile and yells, “Hey, it's Fish and Game, quick, hide the abalones!” The five other fishermen on the pier howl with delight at this.

*“Pier Rats” continued on page 5*



A second guy, Eddie, steps forward. Eddie always wears the same hat: a crusty old Giants cap from the Willie McCovey days, festooned with rusty perch jigs. In anticipation of the questions I always ask, Eddie calls out: "Not finished, San Mateo, 3 hours, jack smelt." All the other guys burst out laughing again. Everybody here has done the CRFS interview numerous times, so they all know the questions: Are you finished fishing today? What county do you live in? How many hours have you been out here? Have you caught anything?

After a few more jokes and a very friendly exchange of pleasantries, the anglers show me some of the more impressive examples of their fishing skill: one 19-inch striped bass, a couple of 14+ inch jack smelt, a pair of bat ray wings already carved up into "bay scallops" and a walleye surfperch with strange markings: bars, red cheeks, yellow pectoral fins.

As one of my ongoing side projects for the DFG, I am assembling a field guide to common Bay Area surfperches. I ask the friendly lady with the wildly colored walleye surfperch if I can please photograph her fish. She scowls at me and says: "If that fish becomes famous, will you guys give me any money?"

"Yes," I say, winking to the others, "but only if it tap dances and sings."

Before heading back to my roost at the entrance to the pier, I tell the anglers that I will be here for a few hours and that I would love to measure their fish and ask them a few questions when they are finished for the day. The woman with the weird walleye surfperch winks and says, "We know the drill."

At 11:30 a.m. I leave Pier 7. In the three hours since I arrived, fourteen people have started fishing, four have left the pier, and three have consented to be interviewed — only one grumpy guy refused to show me his fish. I have catalogued all this information on my forms. The morning tally reads: 1 striped bass, 27 jack smelt, 8 white croakers (kingfish), 3 staghorn sculpins (bullheads), 5 walleye perch and 1 tiny, brown smoothhound shark (sand shark). I have interviewed all the willing anglers for demographic information and measured and weighed every single fish. Unfortunately, though, I left my trusty hand towel at home, and my hands and clothes are now completely covered in fish slime! (When working as a sampler, one can expect to spend a lot of time in two places: piers and laundromats).

After doing a head count to see how many people are still fishing on the pier, I pack up all my gear and set off for more adventures in fish sampling at the Ferry Building, South Harbor Marina Pier, and Agua Vista Pier.

When I finally call it quits for the day, I've completed ten hours of interviewing fishermen in the area. On each pier there are characters, stories, fish tales and images that linger in my mind long after I've clocked out for the night. I took this job because I love fish, plain and simple, but what keeps me going back are the stories, the interactions and the

remarkable characters I meet in the world of piers and docks and jetties. 🐟



*Pier fisherman Andy Pappas, the "Crab King," with a shopping cart rigged to facilitate pier fishing.*

*photo by K. Lombard*



*The author measures a pier fisherman's catch.*  
*photo courtesy K. Lombard*



*photo by K. Lombard*